

## [Dutcher]

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William Dutcher, age 60, Judson Street, Thomaston:

"Me? I hope you're not classing me with the old timers. Sure, I knew plenty of them. Started working at the knife trade when I was sixteen years old up in Phoenix, New York, and followed the business all around the county. Sure, I worked all over. Maybe a dozen different places, the last one down here at Reynolds Bridge. Thomaston Knife Company. The one that burned down.

"Yes, I started at Phoenix when I was a kid. Man named Van Doren owned the factory, and there was mostly English working there, just like all the others. They were very amusing people, that's a fact, and I wish I could remember some of the things they used to say and do. You know how it is, you try to remember something particularly funny, and you can't seem to do it, and afterwards, when it's too late, stories come to you by the dozen.

"They all liked their ale, all of them were hard drinkers. They used to get 'em over to this country, the manufacturers did, there wasn't any immigration restriction then to speak of, and pay their passage, and pay their board for a certain time[,?] give them every inducement to come, and then when they got here they were just as liable to decide they didn't want to go to work as not. And they wouldn't go till they got damn good and ready, either. Maybe a month or so after they got here. The manufacturer who paid their way would be sore as hell, but what could he do?

"They weren't so bad to learn things from as some people would try to make you believe. I was a Yankee kid. My people lived in Cherry Valley since 1818 so that makes me a white man for more than a hundred years, as the fella says. But they were pretty good to me. I

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learned about all there was to learn. I was a grinder for a while. I was a cutler and finisher. I worked in every department. Never had any of them refuse to show me anything. You see, over in the old country, in Sheffield, they kept it right in their own families. A father would teach his son, or an uncle his nephew. And they'd bring the work home nights, so I was told and have the whole 2 family work on it.

“Some of them—most of them in fact— were illiterate, uneducated men, but once in a while you'd meet one who had out of the ordinary advantages, and he could tell you plenty about the old historical cutlery business. The city of Sheffield, they say, has been the heart of the cutlery business in England since there was any cutlery business.

“And way back when there were knights with swords and armors, Sheffield was famous for cutlery. One of those limeys told me once that the early history of knifemaking and cutlery reads like fiction. There was legends and stories by the dozen connected with it. They used to say, for instance, that a Sheffield man made a knife handle out of a bone from the body of Richard the Lion Hearted.

““Whittlers” they were called in those early days. The story was that this ‘whittlers’ broke open the grave of the king years after he was buried, and took a bone from the skeleton and made it into the haft of a knife. It might be true. The fella that told me said he'd read it in a history.

“Too bad you couldn't have talked to some of the old guys I used to know. They'd give you enough to fill a book, and a lot of it was humorous too. They were a great bunch, and its a damn shame the industry went to hell the way it did.

“No, I never saw much hand forging done, except an special jobs. I worked on the drop forges though. They don't have them any more either, they tell me. Press the blades right out. And I wish I had some of that old steel we used. It was great stuff. I'd like to get hold of some to make some chisels out of.

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"I followed the trade for thirty five years. Worked at it till this place here on the Waterbury road folded up. Haven't done any knifmaking since. It's a damn shame what happened to that industry. I blame the tariff and the importers.

"There was a firm of importers down in New York, I forget their names now, 3 but they were a sharp bunch. They used to bring in these unfinished knives. Wasn't any duty on them, you see, or a very low one at the most.

"Then they'd send the knives out and have them assembled and they were all set. They'd come in all ready to put together, but still they were 'unfinished goods' according to the law.

"That's what put the kibosh on it. That and the goddamn cheap German knives. It wasn't the English competition that hurt the business, it was the Germans. The knives were no damn good, but they looked good and the public didn't know the difference.

"You see Jim Truelove? You did, hey. He's pretty well educated, Jim is, and he comes from a knifemaking family? How about John Wood, did you see him? He's about the only one of the limeys I can think of outside Truelove that's left around here. He's not so very old, but he was born over there, and his folks were knifemakers. The rest of them are about all gone. Old Jimmy Fox died here last winter. He was over eighty. He would have been the man for you."